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Research Argument

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Nature or Nurture?

**Section I:** Parents, their children, and the way they interact is not something that crosses people’s minds all the time. Yes, a lot of people like kids and end up having kids, but the basis of how children turn out the way they do is a question unknown to most people. What if someone were to make a bold statement in which they proclaim that parents do not have much of an influence on their children? How exactly would people react? This is exactly what Judith Rich Harris did when she wrote *The Nurture Assumption Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* in 1998. In this revealing and controversial book, Harris delved into her theory that the way children are developed, and the type of people they become is not necessarily in the hands of their parents. All parents, or at least the ones who really care and want to raise a successful, intelligent, and happy child, obviously feel like they have an impact on their children. I do not agree with Harris because her theory seems almost entirely impossible. Although some concepts Harris presents seem valid, I do not agree with her overall idea.

**Section II:** Judith Rich Harris, who was sixty when she wrote her book, is an everyday grandmother and parent (Begley). This is surprising, considering the fact that the argument she makes was very strong-willed and controversial. Although she received a degree in Harvard’s graduate department of psychology, she was not able to make it through the doctorate program because Harris’ professors did not believe she would contribute much to the field of psychology. Harris was able to continue her work in psychology, as she moved on to write psychology textbooks (Begley). Surprisingly, Harris co-wrote three child development textbooks in which she supported the assumption that parents are a strong part of a child’s growth (Harris 9). That fact makes Harris’ argument even less convincing because she believed in the idea she argues against in *The Nurture Assumption*. Although Harris does have a background in psychology, most people would probably agree that her experiences do not qualify her to present such a major point. It is quite possible that Harris wrote the book to justify the way her own children turned out. She had two daughters, one adopted and the other biological, who were very different during childhood and adolescence. The adopted daughter tended to bend the rules much more than her sister, which may have made Harris more likely to create an excuse as to why her adopted daughter acted out. That rationalization could be that parents are not much of an influence on their children, in Harris’ opinion. There is also a possibility that Harris wanted to prove herself to Harvard by showing that she was able to write a prominent book regarding an important issue in psychology. Whatever Harris’ motivation for writing the book may be, she does not really have the proper credentials that would allow her to write a respected book.

**Section III:** Harris’ book starts out by introducing the issue of nature versus nurture, which is a very important part of psychology. She explains that many people believe that nature is the genetic makeup of a person, and nurture is the environment in which a person grows up (Harris 1). In Harris’ opinion, the research that supports the theory of parents having an influence on their children is not properly supported. She also believes that the nurture assumption is of a “cherished cultural myth” (Harris 4). When describing how she decided that she no longer agreed with the nurture assumption, she used observations made throughout her lifetime. One of those examples was of a family she lived with when she was a graduate student. The parents in the family spoke Russian with their children and each other, yet the children were fluent English speakers. The children did not have a Russian accent because they learned English from their peers (Harris 9).

Another way Harris supports her theory is by saying that socialization researchers base their information for the nurture assumption on the “typical middle-class North American or European family” (Harris 11). Children are not studied as much in poorer, lower class societies, which may change the research results. Harris eventually goes on to discuss how children who grow up in the same home are not necessarily more alike, using findings from other researchers to support her statements. This maintains her argument against the nurture assumption because it shows that much of a child’s development is not created in the household. Birth order is another topic Harris argues against in her book. In continuing to support her theory, Harris uses research from Judy Dunn, a specialist on sibling relationships, and Robert Plomin, an expert on behavioral genetics. Their research states that the differences in personality and psychopathology are not actually connected to the birth order of a person (Harris 39-40). A large part of Harris’ argument is that peers influence children, and more than once, Harris implies that children tell their parents about things that happen in school, and displaysome of the behavior used at places other than home. When the situation is reversed, she thinks children are a lot less likely to show their home behavior to peers (Harris 63). An example Harris uses of influence outside of the home is children born to deaf parents (Harris 66). How else can the children learn their native language than by their environment outside of the home? This is a good point made by Harris because it proves that parents are not always the source of development for a child. Harris argues against the data socialization researchers use to support their theories. She argues that the researchers studying the effects of divorce rely on the parents to answer questions about their children’s behavior, and that the parents may not be the most reliable sources. The researchers also examine the children in their home, where the effects of unpleasant memories may be present, and may change the research (Harris 71).

Harris’ main point to get across is that parents should worry less about their parenting strategies and how they will affect their children, but definitely not for them to neglect or harm their children in any way. Harris thinks that parents have some influence on their children, but she wants people to know that parents are not all a child relies on to develop. Instead, Harris thinks influences other than parents are stronger for children.

**Section IV:** Parents genuinely believe that the way they treat their children has an important affect on the way they grow and develop. Parents do not want peers to be a deciding influence on their children because the peers of their children are not the people raising them. As Dr. Kyle Pruett says, “In no way do peers compare with the overwhelming significance of parents” (Pruett). This statement is an opinion, but there is also a great deal of research supporting the importance of parents, and the development of their children (Eberstadt). Other ways that Harris is criticized is the fact that “the studies that Harris relied on were not nearly sophisticated enough to detect some of the subtle ways that parents affect their children” (Williams). Harris is also accused of gathering her information inconsistently. The research done by socialization experts is criticized, but the behavioral geneticists who support her theories are not examined in such detail. Another argument against Harris’ ideas is that a study she uses, for her statement that something taught at home is less important to a child than the experiences and ideas learned by peers, was done seventy years ago. Opponents believe that the reason Harris uses this aged study as an example, even though the study has been arguable for years, is because not doing so would detract from her strong opinion about peer influence. The research agrees with her idea, so Harris feels obliged to use the research, even though it may not be very reliable. One of the most common critiques of Harris’ book is that the book itself may become an excuse for parents to focus on their children less (Eberstadt).

Most of the critical assessments of *The Nurture Assumption* seem to be accurate. Even so, the critics who judge the book may have a flaw similar to that of Harris in the sense that they base *their* opinions off of research, research that may be just as faulty as Harris’. Believing in research that a person presents on a page is not always safe to do because no one can say that everything used is totally accurate. One source I found, *Do Parents Matter? Scholars Need to Explain What Research Really Shows*, by Wendy M. Williams was probably the best source because it did seem to have credible information. Although some sources failed to provide information that could be supported thoroughly, most were able to convey an important message regarding opposing viewpoints towards Harris’ work.

**Section V:** The truth of the matter is that parents *and* peers have an influence on children. In my opinion, there is no way that peers have more of an influence than parents. Even if I did believe in what Harris says, I would have to argue that the development of a child is not as cut and dry as Harris makes it out to be. She does admit in some cases that parents are not totally unimportant. For example, Harris states that “the bond between parent and child lasts a lifetime” (Harris 341). The way in which Harris contradicts herself throughout the book makes her ideas much less convincing and, in all honesty, harder to believe. I found faults in some of her writing, such as blaming the nurture assumption on faulty studies and research, and then using the same types of research to support her own claims. Another contradiction Harris makes is saying that peers have more of an influence on children’s behavior, but then saying that parents have a part in the choosing of their children’s peers. In my opinion, being a part of that process is parental influence. All contradictions aside, Harris is able to support her ideas somewhat, and I give her credit for that. In the end, I was simply not able to agree with her theory. I do not see how Harris can say that parents are not a big part of the development of a child. How could that possibly be true? Children observe and follow their parent’s actions from day one, and then use what they learn from their parents all throughout life. Peers are a part of a child’s growth process, but parents seem to be much more influential.

**Section VI:** Works Cited

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